

NINE MYTHS ABOUT THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN

7. The Myth of Superiority
8. The Myth that the Tuskegee Airmen units were all black
9. The Myth that all Tuskegee Airmen were fighter pilots who flew red-tailed P-51s to escort bombers

1. THE MYTH OF INFERIORITY

The first misconception

of Management Control, War Department, conducted an official study to compare the performance of the 99th Fighter Squadron with that of other P-40 units in the Twelfth Air Force. The subsequent report, released on March 30, 1944, concluded that the 99th Fighter Squadron had performed as well as the other squadrons.³

As you can see from the table below, there were

shot down fewer enemy aircraft than the other P-51 fighter groups, and did not have any aces, because they were staying closer to the bombers they were escorting, as ordered, and not abandoning the bombers to chase after enemy aircraft in the distance. Twenty-seven of the bombers in groups the 332d Fighter Group was assigned to escort were shot down by enemy aircraft. The average number of bombers shot down by enemy aircraft while under the escort of the other groups of the Fifteenth Air Force was 46. The Tuskegee Airmen lost significantly fewer bombers than the average number lost by the other fighter groups in the Fifteenth Air Force.

2. THE MYTH OF

Another misconception that developed during the last months of the war is the story that no bomber under escort by the Tuskegee Airmen was ever shot down by enemy aircraft. A version of this misconception *The Air Force Integrates* (

record on escort duty remained unparalleled. They never lost an American bomber to

This misconception originated even before the end of World War II, in the press. A version of the statement first appeared in a March 10, 1945 issue of *Liberty Magazine*, in an article by Roi Ottley, who claimed that the black pilots had not lost a bomber they escorted to enemy aircraft in more than 100 missions. The 332d Fighter Group had by then flown more than 200 missions. Two weeks after the Ottley article, on March 24, 1945, another article appeared in the *Chicago Defender*, claiming that in more than 200 missions, the group had not lost a bomber they escorted to enemy aircraft. In reality, bombers under Tuskegee Airmen escort were shot down on seven different days: June 9, 1944; June 13, 1944; July 12, 1944; July 18, 1944; July 20, 1944; August 24,

1944; and March 24, 1945.⁴ Moreover, the Tuskegee Airmen flew 311 missions for the Fifteenth Air Force between early June 1944 and late April 1945, and only 179 of those missions escorted bombers.

Alan Gropman interviewed General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., years after World War II. The statement was true.

General Davis replied that he questioned the statement, but that it had been repeated so many times people were coming to believe it (AFHRA call number K239.0512-1922).⁵ Davis himself must have known the statement was not true, because his own citation for the Distinguished Flying Cross, contained in Fifteenth Air Force General Order 2972

his squadrons that in spite of the large number of enemy fighters, the bomber formation

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In order to determine whether or not bombers under the escort of the Tuskegee Airmen were ever shot down by enemy aircraft during World War II, I practiced the following method.

in the daily mission folders of the Fifteenth Air Force. The Fifteenth Air Force daily mission folders also contain narrative mission reports for all the groups that took part in missions on any given day, including reports of both the fighter and bombardment groups, as well as the wings to which they belonged. The call number for these documents at the Air Force Historical Research Agency is 670.332 followed by the date. The bombardment group daily mission reports show which days bombers of the group were shot down by enemy aircraft.

Next, I checked the index of the Missing Air Crew Reports, to see if the groups that the Tuskegee Airmen were escorting that day lost any aircraft. If any aircraft of those groups were lost that day, I recorded the missing air crew report numbers. This index of Missing Air Crew Reports is located in the archives branch of the Air Force Historical Research Agency

Air Crew Reports are filed on microfiche in the archives branch of the Air Force Historical Research Agency.

Using this procedure, I determined conclusively that on at least seven days, bombers under the escort of the Tu by enemy aircraft. Those days include June 9, 1944; June 13, 1944; July 12, 1944; July 18, 1944; July 20, 1944; August 24, 1944; and March 24, 1945.⁷

TABLE II: BOMBERS SHOT DOWN BY ENEMY AIRCRAFT WHILE FLYING IN GROUPS THE 332D FIGHTER GROUP WAS ASSIGNED TO ESCORT

DATE	TIME	LOCATION	TYPE	SERIAL NUMBER	WG	GROUP	MISSING AIR CREW REPORT
9 June 1944	0905	46 40 N, 12 40 E	B-24	42-78219	304	459	6317
9 June 1944	0907	46 00 N, 12 40 E	B-24	42-52318	304	459	6179
13 June 1944	0900	Poroguardo, Italy	B-24	42-94741	49	484	6097
12 July 1944	1050	20 miles SE of Mirabeau, France	1 re f*				

1944

Memmingen

misconception appears in the Oliver North compilation, *War Stories III* ((Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2005), p. 152.⁸

2 Lt William W. Green Jr 302 FS

	1 Lt Earl R. Lane	100 FS	1 ME-262	2293 XV AF 12 Apr 45
31 Mar 1945	2 Lt Raul W. Bell	100 FS	1 FW-190	2293 XV AF 12 Apr 45
	2 Lt Thomas P. Brasswell	99 FS	1 FW-190	2292 XV AF 12 Apr 45

Sometimes one hears the claim that the Tuskegee Airmen were the first to shoot down German jets.¹¹ Three Tuskegee Airmen, 1st Lt. Roscoe Brown, 1st Lt. Earl R. Lane, and 2nd Lt. Charles V. Brantley, each shot down a German Me-262 jet on March 24,

Research Agency; 308 Fighter Squadron History, Jan 1942-Jun 1945, under call number SQ-FI-308-HI at Air Force Historical Research Agency.

Moreover, on the day three Tuskegee Airmen shot down three German jets over Berlin on March 24, 1945, five other American pilots of the Fifteenth Air Force, on the same mission, with the 31st Fighter Group, also shot down German Me-262 jets. They included Colonel William A. Daniel, 1st Lt. Forrest M. Keene, 1st Lt Raymond D.

Leonard, Capt. Kenneth T. Smith, and 2nd Lt. William M. Wilder.¹⁴

5. THE MYTH THAT THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN SANK A GERMAN DESTROYER.

The 332d Fighter Group mission report for June 25, 1944 notes that the group sank a German destroyer in the Adriatic Sea near Trieste that day. The pilots on that mission undoubtedly believed they had sunk a German destroyer, but other records cast doubt on whether the ship actually sank.

The only German ship in the Trieste area of the Adriatic Sea reported to have been hit by Allied aircraft on June 25, 1944 was the TA-22, the former Italian destroyer *Giuseppi Missori*. The date and the place match the group mission report. However, the TA-22 had been converted by the Germans into a torpedo boat, and was no longer a destroyer. Although it was so heavily damaged that it was put out of action permanently, it did not sink. It was decommissioned on November 8, 1944, and scuttled at Trieste on February 5, 1945. It might as well have been sunk on June 25, 1944, because it never fought the Allies again.¹⁵

Some sources suggest that the Tuskegee Airmen sank the German ship TA-27, which had been the Italian warship *Aurige*. The TA-27 was actually sunk on June 9, 1944 off the coast of Elba, west of the Italian peninsula, far from the Adriatic Sea, which

he did not experience any difficulty in mounting larger fuel tanks to the wings of the P-51s he was maintaining so that they could carry out the mission to Berlin. He did not remember the maintenance personnel needing to rob any train or warehouse in order to obtain the larger fuel tanks they needed for the mission.¹⁹

The legend might have been based on the fact that the larger 110- gallon auxiliary fuel tanks were delivered to Ramitelli by truck, not from the depot at Foggia, where the smaller fuel tanks had been obtained, but from a railhead at Chieuti instead. On March 23, 1945, the 55th Air Service Squadron of the 380th Air Service Group dispatched trucks from

366th th Air Service Squadron was based at Ramitelli, Italy, with the 332d Fighter Group, to service its P-51 aircraft. Another 55th Air Service Squadron diary entry in March 1945 notes that the squadron also used trucks to deliver 110-gallon fuel tanks from Chieuti to the 52d Fighter Group, which, like the 332d Fighter Group, flew P-51s for the Fifteenth Air Force and which was based near Ramitelli.²⁰ The fact that trucks delivered the larger fuel tanks not from the depot at Foggia, as the smaller fuel tanks had been, but from the railhead at Chieuti instead, might have evolved into a

abandoned the bombers they were assigned to escort in order to chase after enemy fighters to increase their aerial victory credit scores for fame and glory. One version of

bombers yet. The 332d Fighter Group started escorting bombers for the Fifteenth Air Force in June 1944.

the 332d Fighter Group had demonstrated its obvious superiority to the other fighter groups of the Fifteenth Air Force.²⁶

That might be one reason Col. Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. flew a P-51 aircraft with

²⁷ There is another explanation. During the spring of 1944, Major General Ira C. Eaker, commander of the Mediterranean Allied Air Forces, reassigned the 332d Fighter Group from the Twelfth Air Force to the Fifteenth Air Force because he sought its help with bomber escort duty.²⁸

the 332d Fighter Group for the bomber escort mission, even before the group had flown any heavy bomber escort missions.

At times, the bombardment crews would mistake one set of escorts for another. For example, World War II B-24 bomber pilot John Sonneborn remembered gratefully that his aircraft was saved by a red-tailed P-51 pilot when he was flying a mission to Ploesti, Rumania, on May 5, 1944. He assumed that he had been escorted by a Tuskegee Airman, since he learned after the war that they had flown red-tailed P-51s in his theater. What Mr. Sonneborn did not realize was that the 332d Fighter Group did not begin flying missions to escort heavy bombers such as B-24s until June 1944, and the 332d Fighter Group did not begin flying P-51 aircraft until July 1944. If Sonneborn were saved by a pilot in a red-tailed P-51, that fighter pilot must have belonged to the 31st Fighter Group, because the 31st Fighter Group escorted B-24s to Ploesti on May 5, 1944, and the tails of the 31st Fighter Group P-51s were painted with red stripes. After the war, bomber crews sometimes gave fighter escort credit to the wrong group.²⁹

Utilization of Negro Manpower in the Post-War Army. Since the report had been

prepared by a committee of generals headed by Lt. Gen. Alvan C. Gillem, Jr., it was

-51 fighter

escort groups of the Fifteenth Air Force, which included the all-black 332nd Fighter Group and the all-white 31st, 52nd, 325th, and 332nd Fighter Groups (the other three fighter escort groups of the Fifteenth Air Force, the 1st, 14th, and 82nd, flew P-38 aircraft). While the report praised the 332d Fighter Group for successfully escorting bombers, it also criticized the group for having fewer aerial victory credits than the other groups because it did not aggressively chase enemy fighters to shoot them down, but stayed with the bombers it was escorting. The report also claimed that each of the three white P-51 fighter groups shot down more than twice as many aircraft as it lost in combat, but that the 332d Fighter Group lost more of its own aircraft in combat than it destroyed of the enemy. The implication is that the black 332d Fighter Group might have lost fewer bombers it escorted than the other three white P-51 fighter escort groups, it also shot down the least number of enemy aircraft. Depending on what the criterion was, the 332d Fighter Group was the worst and also the best at the same time.³⁰

TABLE VII: COMPARISON OF FIFTEENTH AIR FORCE P-51 FIGHTER GROUPS

Fighter Group	Predominant race	Victories per aircraft lost in combat
31 st	White	2.49
52 nd	White	2.08
325 th	White	2.22
332 nd	Black	0.66

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War Department Special Board on Negro Manpower, November 1945, Air Force Historical Research Agency call number 170.2111-1, November 1945), section on

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Many of the flight instructors at Tuskegee were white. This was true at all three of the bases around Tuskegee, including Kennedy Field, where civilian pilot training took place; at Moton Field, where the primary flight training occurred; and at Tuskegee Army Air Field, where the basic, advanced, and transition training was completed. White officers retained leadership positions in the flying training organizations at Moton Field and Tuskegee Army Air Field throughout World War II.³²

For more than a year before the 99th Fighter Squadron was assigned to the 332^d Fighter Group, it served in combat overseas while attached to various white fighter groups, as if it were one of the squadrons of those groups. In effect, those groups included both black and white personnel while the 99th Fighter Squadron was attached to them. Some of the members of the 99th Fighter Squadron, which by then had become an all-black organization, resented being assigned to the 332nd Fighter Group, because they had become accustomed to serving in white groups, flying alongside white fighter squadrons, and did not relish being placed with the black fighter group simply because they were also black. In a sense, it was a step back toward more segregation. At any rate, many Tuskegee Airmen during World War II served in units with both black and white personnel, although as the war progressed, their organizations increasingly became all-black.³³

To be sure, some of the white officers who were in command of Tuskegee Airmen opposed equal opportunities for them. Colonel William Momyer of the 33rd Fighter Group opposed the continued combat role of the 99th Fighter Squadron when it was attached to his group, and Colonel Robert Selway, commander of the 477th Bombardment Group at Freeman Field, attempted to enforce segregated officers' clubs at

that base, and had many of the Tuskegee Airmen arrested for opposing his policy.³⁴ But for every white officer who discouraged equal opportunity for the Tuskegee Airmen under their command, there were other white officers who sincerely worked for their success. They included Forrest Shelton, who instructed pilots in civilian and primary pilot training at Kennedy and Moton Fields near Tuskegee; Major William T. Smith, who supervised primary pilot training at Moton Field; Captain Robert M. Long, a flight instructor who taught the first Tuskegee Airmen pilots to graduate from advanced pilot training at Tuskegee Army Air Field; Colonel Noel Parrish, commander of the pilot training at Tuskegee Army Air Field; and Colonel Earl E. Bates, commander of the 79th

51s overseas, and months before they received the assignment to escort heavy bombers deep into enemy territory.³⁶

To be sure, the

Some of the African-American pilots who trained at Tuskegee Army Air Field during World War II never became fighter pilots at all. They became bomber pilots, and were assigned after their Tuskegee training to the 477th Bombardment Group, which flew twin-engined B-25s. That group never deployed overseas to take part in combat during the war.³⁸

CONCLUSION. Whoever dispenses with the myths that have come to circulate around the Tuskegee Airmen in the many decades since World War II emerges with a greater appreciation for what they actually accomplished. If they did not demonstrate that they were far superior to the members of the six non-black fighter escort groups of the Fifteenth Air Force with which they served, they certainly demonstrated that they were not inferior to them, either. Moreover, they began at a line farther back, overcoming many more obstacles on the way to combat. The Tuskegee Airmen proved that they were equal to the other fighter pilots with whom they served heroically during World War II. Their exemplary performance opened the door for the racial integration of the military services, beginning with the Air Force, and contributed ultimately to the end of racial segregation in the United States.

Daniel L. Haulman, PhD
Chief, Organizational Histories Branch
Air Force Historical Research Agency

NOTES

¹ Alan L. Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1985), p. 2-3.

² Alan L. Gropman, *The Air Force Integrates, 1945-1964* (Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1985), p. 12; Ulysses Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, United States Army, 1966), 157.

³ Air Force Historical Research Agency call number 134.65-496.

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Air Force Historical Research Agency. This paper is based on histories of the 332d Fighter Group, daily

mission reports of the Fifteenth Air Force, and Missing Air Crew Reports that show the times, locations, and causes of aircraft losses.

⁵ Interview of General Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., by Alan Gropman, AFHRA call number K239.0512-122.

⁶ Fifteenth Air Force General Order 2972 issued on 31 Aug 1944.

⁷ 332d Fighter Group histories, under call number GP-332-HI at the Air Force Historical Research Agency; Fifteenth Air Force daily mission folders, under call number 670.332 at the Air Force Historical Research Agency; Missing Air Crew Reports, indexed and filed on microfiche in the Archives Branch of the Air Force Historical Research Agency.

⁸ Oliver North, *War Stories III* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2005), p. 152.

⁹ Monthly histories of the 332d Fighter Group, June 1944-April 1945; Fifteenth Air Force General Order 2350 dated 6 Aug 1944; Fifteenth Air Force General Order 4287 dated 1 Nov 1944.

¹⁰ Charles E. Francis,

²⁷ Benjamin O. Davis, Jr.,